Best Safety Practices for Online/Digital/Virtual Interaction with Minors

Online Signature Formats
https://go.docusign.com/
https://www.hellosign.com/
https://www.formstack.com/online-forms
https://www.google.com/docs/about/

Websites:
https://www.insuranceboard.org/
https://www.ctucc.org/websitesandsocialmedia

Dear Guardians and People Under 18,
Social networking sites, texting, e-mailing and other forms of electronic communication are a reality in our lives. The internet and social media are evolving tools which offer great promise for developing and deepening ministries but also pose significant safety challenges. The improper use of digital communication can produce serious consequences.

In this current time of physical isolation, it is important to recognize the best practices for online safety when working with those under 18.

Quality ministry models appropriate boundaries for <u>ministry leaders, guardians, and those under 18.</u> Please take time to review the best practices for online safety as a family.

Please also keep in mind that more younger children are using online resources to communicate more, and make sure your best practices reflect age-appropriate responses.

Always make sure that those working with children have background checks.

Best Practices for Pastors and Churches

- Any information sent digitally (e-mail, social networking, etc.) is not confidential and may be reported or shared with others.
- Authorized church officials must be included as additional administrators of all church-related accounts in order to allow oversight.
- Staff and Authorized Volunteers must use all privacy settings available to shield minors from inappropriate content.
- No full names or contact information of any minor shall appear on any church-related website or social media page. No contact information of any adult shall appear on any church-related website or social media page without the written consent from the named adult individual.
- Copyrighted materials must not be published on church-sponsored sites, without written approval from the copyright holder.
- Adults are not permitted to friend, follow, or otherwise engage in direct but private electronic forums with minors. Group communication through products such as the Remind App are acceptable for church use and should include at least one other adult in the group. Youth social media groups tied to the church are permitted with at least two adults in the group, and with the understanding to all participants that NO direct messaging occur between adult and child.
- All communication (even confidential) must include another adult that has been authorized by the church or is the legal guardian of the child.
- If a minister has a public social media profile. All content must be appropriate.
- Mandatory Reporting
  - Any inappropriate material covered by "Mandatory Reporting" laws that is discovered on any church related social media or technology devices must be reported to pastor, documented for church records, and then deleted from the site. (If you have evidence to be used in a criminal investigation, DO NOT delete it without approval of authorities. Close down the site until cleared by authorities. You may have a "spoliation of evidence" issue that will hinder prosecution.)
  - Any inappropriate material that is not covered by "Mandatory Reporting" laws must be deleted from the site. Church staff, authorized volunteers and authorized church officials will decide whether material not covered by Mandatory Reporting laws is inappropriate.
- Any content that details inappropriate behavior during a church-sponsored event or activity must be reported to and addressed by church leader or authorized volunteer leader and minor's parents.
- Covenants and basic understandings of online safety should be discussed by all directly involved in the online ministry.
- Make sure all media permission slips and consent forms are up to date.
- Make sure that you have a way to invite new people and still follow the online rules and get permission.

BONUS: When hosting online gatherings, have each guardian leave a message and/or "wave" to the host to acknowledge they are aware of their minor's participation. Leaders should keep lists and record this information during check-in.

Best Practices for Guardians

- Double check that all of these healthy boundaries are being followed and that the information you are receiving is reliable.
- Parents (or guardians as appropriate) must approve a minor's participation in any church-related social media. In cases of separated parents, approval must be from primary caregiver. Approval is indicated by a signed Social Media Approval Form which must be renewed on a yearly basis.
- Signed church Media Release Forms must be received from parents/guardians of all minors whose images are to be distributed or published (digitally, printed, or otherwise) for use on authorized media sites, worship, posters or in any form of publicity. The staff member or authorized volunteer leader using the images is responsible for obtaining the parent/guardian's permission.
- If the minor wants to include a friend, please help the pastor connect to the guardian of that minor to exchange safety information.
- Any information sent digitally (e-mail, social networking, etc.) is not confidential and may be reported or shared with others.
- Please make sure your child knows what is and is not appropriate to share.
    a. Any inappropriate material covered by "Mandatory Reporting" laws that is discovered on any church related social media or technology devices must be reported to pastor, documented for church records, and then deleted from the site. (If you have evidence to be used in a criminal investigation, DO NOT delete it without approval of authorities. Close down the site until cleared by authorities. You may have a "spoliation of evidence" issue that will hinder prosecution.)
    b. Any inappropriate material that is not covered by "Mandatory Reporting" laws must be deleted from the site. Church staff, authorized volunteers and authorized church officials will decide whether material not covered by Mandatory Reporting laws is inappropriate.
    c. Content that is improper or offensive, and not suited to appropriate adult/child relationships
        i. *No explicit sexual, verbal, or abusive content.*
        ii. Should not depict, describe, or represent, in a patently offensive way with respect to what is suitable for minors, an actual or simulated sexual act or sexual contact.
- Any content that details inappropriate behavior during a church-sponsored event or activity must be reported to and addressed by church leader or authorized volunteer leader and minor's parents.
- Covenants and basic understandings of online safety should be discussed by all directly involved in the online ministry.

Best Practice for Minors:

- Covenants and basic understandings of online safety should be discussed by all directly involved in the online and digital ministry.
- Do not post information that belongs to someone else.
- Do not share private information or secrets.
- Respect the dignity of every person.
- Be aware that one-on-one conversations are not healthy boundaries between adults and minors in any form.
- Help younger kids know that they need to inform their guardian when they are using technology so that it can be monitored in all types of relationships.
- Please be aware that church leaders are mandatory reporters.
- Church leaders will always find a way for a minor to "opt in" to learning about their faith, but if a minor chooses to make inappropriate choices, those choices may require "opting out" until better understanding of a safe space and appropriate boundaries is obtained.
    - Be Kind.
    - No Bullying.
    - Be Responsible.
    - Respect.
    - Think (Count to 5) before you speak/write/text/ or share something that can not be taken back.
- You must also respect the boundaries of various ages and allowing the leadership to create groups that can engage in age-appropriate interactions.